

Indo-Pak Relations: A Tale of Missed Opportunities

Indo-Pak relations have remained hostage to their historical differences over the past 70 years notwithstanding several attempts to resolve the same. The disharmony between the two major players has adversely affected the ability of the region as a whole to attain its true potential. The continued conflict and tension between them has affected the larger peace in the subcontinent. The overt acquisition of nuclear weapons by India and Pakistan in 1998 has only complicated matters rather than bringing about a sobering of mutual distrust and conflict. Instead, a suicidal nuclear arms race continues in the absence of an overarching restraint regime.

Since independence, India and Pakistan have engaged in four sizable wars and umpteen border skirmishes. The war in 1971 ended in defeat and another partition of Pakistan. This unresolved dispute has been a major drain on the resources of the two countries while also being a major stumbling block to normalising relations between them. It has caused two wars (1948 and 1965), a serious border conflict (Kargil, 1999) and has brought immense suffering and hardship to the people of the state. India on its part has tried to accommodate Pakistan as seen during the 1965 war, 1972 Shimla Agreement, 1992 Lahore Agreement or the 2009 Sharm-el Sheikh Agreement but peace has remained elusive.

Pakistan's proxy subversive operations to right perceived historical wrongs and its reactive deployment of nuclear weapons have not helped matters. The problem of Non-State Actors (NSAs) and their trans-border activities has been one of the most vexatious issues between the two neighbours. India has accused Pakistan for fomenting trouble by sponsoring "cross-border terrorism" against it. Pakistan has used its relations with other countries including Afghanistan and China to promote its anti-India crusades. Its participation in the US-led war on terror has also been exploited to continue its war against India.

Pakistan's tendency to assume the guardianship of Indian Muslims is one of the major irritants between India and Pakistan. Other issues which became irritants between the two countries were the distribution of river waters, divergent perception of Indian Ocean as a zone of peace, Sir Creek issue, the Siachin dispute, accession of Junagarh, Hyderabad and

Kashmir to India. But the most important issue which has marred the relations between the two countries has indeed been Kashmir.

Alleged interference in each other's internal affairs is a major irritant in Indo-Pak relations. India rightly considers Pakistan responsible for fomenting terrorism in Kashmir and other parts of its territory thereby hugely compromising India's national security. The 26/11 Mumbai attacks, the Pathankot and Uri attacks and Pakistan's role in recent Kashmir uprisings following Hizbul militant Burhan Wani's killing have not helped the bilateral relations.

Pakistan continues to drag its feet to take any action against the terrorist outfits operating from its soil for their role in terrorist strikes in India despite irrefutable evidence adduced by the latter. Pakistan on its part has been accusing India of similar role in Balochistan. Pakistan complains that India has provided material support, through Afghanistan, to the insurgents in Baluchistan and parts of the Federally Administered Tribal areas in the north-west.

The differences have transcended their common borders and have played out in Afghanistan. The biggest beneficiaries of this prolonged conflict have been the extremist elements in both countries with the capability to disrupt and derail any effort towards resolving the outstanding issues. Major world powers have utilised the disturbed peace in South Asia to promote their geo-political interests by playing one country against the other.

Pakistan has opposed all Indian efforts to gain a permanent berth in the UN Security Council. According to Pakistan, creation of newer membership of the Security Council will create additional centres of power. It also opposes India's claim on the ground of latter's violation of the UN Security Council resolutions on Jammu and Kashmir in deference to the right of the Kashmiri people to self-determination. Pakistan believes that a country that has violated the UN Charter is not entitled to a permanent seat in the UN Security Council.

Pakistan has also opposed India's attempt to gain membership of the Nuclear Suppliers Group (NSG) as latter has not joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) on nuclear weapons. It believes that the same would deal a severe blow to the non-proliferation regime. It opposed the Indo-US or Indo-Australia nuclear deals on the same ground. According to Pakistan, the US-India defence agreement will strengthen the existing imbalance of conventional and nuclear weapons and would further destabilise the fragile peace in South Asia.

Even though the longstanding Indo-Pak water dispute was suitably resolved through Indus Basin Treaty in 1960 as mediated by the World Bank, the problem is far from settled. Pakistan has raised concerns over some of the Indian hydro-electric projects on the western rivers as the same will compromise the interests of its farmers. The water problem has a potential to precipitate in future given India's threat against honouring its commitment under the Treaty in the wake of Pakistan's increasing encouragement to the subversive activities in India.

The growing strategic partnership between India and Afghanistan has only added to Pakistan's concerns about India trying to squeeze it from east and west. With uncertainties surrounding the internal dynamics of a post-NATO Afghanistan, it also has potential to become a new theatre for Indo-Pak hostility. This would be prejudicial not only to the peace and stability of Afghanistan, but also for the region as a whole.

As the conflict in Afghanistan winds down, India and Pakistan will need to discuss their

respective legitimate interests in that country. India will need to convince Pakistan that its interest in Afghanistan is not aimed at opening up a new front in the west or promote destabilisation in the two Pakistani provinces bordering Afghanistan. For its part, Pakistan will need to reassure India that it respects India's sovereign rights to develop its bilateral relations with Kabul.

Pakistan has always viewed Afghanistan through the prism of its antagonistic relations with India, using Afghanistan for gaining a strategic depth against possible Indian threats. Subsequent to the fall of Taliban in Afghanistan, Indian humanitarian aid in that war-ravaged country appeared to Pakistan as a threat to its interests in Afghanistan. A sceptic Pakistan has apprehended strategic encirclement by India, more so after latter's establishment of a new airbase in Tajikistan.

Peace and stability are pre-requisites for all-round development of trade and economy, not to speak of its positive implications for better socio-politico-cultural relations. This has assumed added urgency after the two acquired nuclear weapons as there is little margin for error now. It is imperative that the security situation in South Asia is stabilised and made as resistant as possible to the periodic shocks caused by the actions of NSAs. Avoidance of crises, prevention of conflicts and the building of mutual confidence should, therefore, be common objectives for the two countries.

There is a huge untapped potential for the expansion of bilateral trade but issues such as non-tariff barriers to trade and a long list of items on the negative list have to be resolved before significant improvement can be expected. The promotion of official trade will discourage illegal trade that at present cost the two countries substantial revenue. There is also a strong constituency that believes in deeper economic engagement to boost bilateral trade. The Indo-Pak rivalry has also hobbled SAARC to act as an engine of regional growth.

The serious energy shortages faced by both countries are hampering their economic development. Hence, it would be in the interests of the two countries to forge co-operation in the field of energy. While India has effectively withdrawn from the proposed Iran-Pakistan-India gas pipeline project, it still seems interested in the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline. TAPI depends largely on peace in Afghanistan, which means that India and Pakistan should have a stable Afghanistan as a common cause. In the longer term, depending on the overall state of their relations, the two countries could possibly also collaborate in the field of nuclear energy as well.

The 1999 Lahore Memorandum of Understanding was the first Indo-Pak effort to come to grips with their mutual problems to explore measures to reduce tensions in a nuclearised South Asia. Though the process was interrupted by the Kargil episode, the proposed confidence building measures (CBMs) were taken up when the composite dialogue resumed in 2004, resulting in some significant bilateral agreements.

Regular exchanges between the people of the two countries can create better understanding and goodwill. Recent initiatives such as the frequent discussions and exchanges between parliamentarians and politicians from both the countries are moves in the right direction and need to be sustained. The agreement for a liberalised visa regime is also a positive development, if implemented in a positive spirit. But CBMs can only provide temporary stability at best.

The efforts at building confidence and trust and seeking resolution of outstanding disputes can only bear fruit if the process is sustained and remains uninterrupted. It is important that two countries establish a comprehensive oversight mechanism to monitor the implementation of past agreements while also giving impetus to the peace process. The two countries will also need to resist the disruptive forces by evolving institutional mechanisms to deal with them.

Economic co-operation or socio-cultural harmonies cannot yield any dividends in the absence of peace and stability. India and Pakistan, therefore, need to remove the causes of the tensions underpinning their relations. Continued allegations of violations of the Line of Control between India and Pakistan, Pakistan's failure to bring the perpetrators of the various terror attacks on India to justice, and activities of Pakistan-based terror groups are signs of continued trust deficit between them. India's major security concern with Pakistan arises from latter's support to cross-border terrorism.

Islamabad has increasingly expressed concerns at the deterioration of its strategic balance vis-a-vis India. Both the countries need to sit together to appreciate the situation to smoothen the rough edges in bilateral relations. The Indo-Pak dialogues should become part of a sustained effort of diplomatic outreach rather than an on-and-off affair. Even though India has always resisted foreign mediation and prefers bilateral engagement, third party mediation in selected issue area may not be such a bad idea as long as the same sticks to predetermined stipulations. If an Indo-Pak rapprochement really happens, it shall usher in a new era of development and growth in entire South Asia.

Salient Points

- Indo-Pak relations have remained hostage to their historical differences over the past 70 years notwithstanding several attempts to resolve the same.
- The disharmony between the two major players has adversely affected the ability of the region as a whole to attain its true potential.
- Since independence, India and Pakistan have engaged in four sizable wars and umpteen border skirmishes.
- Pakistan's proxy subversive operations to right perceived historical wrongs and its reactive deployment of nuclear weapons have not helped matters.
- The biggest beneficiaries of this prolonged conflict have been the extremist elements in both countries.
- It is imperative that the security situation in South Asia is stabilised and made as resistant as possible to the periodic shocks.
- Avoidance of crises, prevention of conflicts and the building of mutual confidence should be common objectives for the two countries.
- India and Pakistan need to remove the causes of the tensions underpinning their relations.

Glossary

Skirmish: a brief battle between small groups

Foment: to incite or instigate

Prejudicial: harmful

Mechanism: a group of objects or parts that interact together

Strategic: pertaining to strategy